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**STATEMENT BY DIANN RUST-TIERNEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
NATIONAL COALITION TO ABOLISH THE DEATH PENALTY
ON SIGNING OF ILLINOIS DEATH PENALTY REPEAL BILL INTO LAW**

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Today we received the welcomed news that Governor Pat Quinn of Illinois has signed legislation that ends the death penalty in Illinois. This is a true cause for celebration.

This is a major accomplishment for the people of Illinois, and signals the possibility of a new approach to policy debates about crime and justice and capital punishment in particular.

A new approach that seeks to shape a system of justice focused on addressing the harm done to families and communities; holds people accountable for the harm they do and does so in a way that is consistent with our core values, recognizing that our respect and desire to honor the precious gift of life is paramount.

I see the possibility of a new approach to the policy debate where no voices, no community, no family is excluded from the discussion about how best to achieve this goal.

We are all connected on this journey. When we hear the horrific news about a murdered child, we are all deeply moved by feelings of anger, shock and sadness that are only a dim reflection of the suffering being experienced by that family.

When I receive a phone call or letter from the mother, or sister of a person condemned to death, who is desperately searching for someone who will listen, someone who will help them navigate the morass of a death penalty system that seems to be on automatic pilot – caring more about grinding the process to an end than ensuring that the person set to be executed is actually guilty, I feel their anguish, anger and frustration at not being heard.

So our response to the worst that can be imagined must be one that reflects that understanding of our interconnections which rests on common ground. We cannot have justice for victims if the system of justice cannot assure us that those being punished are

guilty. We can not have accountability if the system of justice itself is not accountable to the communities that it serves and accountable to all communities equally.

The death penalty system in Illinois was broken, despite the best efforts of lawmakers and others involved in the administration of the punishment.

Over the years, Illinois policymakers have demonstrated admirable leadership. When they became aware of the magnitude of the risk that innocent people would be executed, the moratorium on executions was instituted. Study commissions conducted thorough reviews of the death penalty, and significant reforms were enacted. They tried to make it work – but did the responsible thing for all involved when they realized that despite their best efforts, it might not be possible to make the system operate with the certainty and precision they would have liked.

There is national momentum that has death penalty statutes in other states coming under closer scrutiny as well. We can expect to see other states moving to repeal their death penalty statutes in the near future. A repeal measure has been introduced this year in Kansas. Montana’s Senate passed a repeal measure this year in a bipartisan vote of 26 to 24. Connecticut’s legislature passed a repeal measure in 2009, which was vetoed by then Governor Jodi Rell. A new repeal bill has been introduced in Connecticut this year, and Governor Dannel P. Malloy has indicated he would sign the measure if it passes.

This closer scrutiny of death penalty systems coincides with a general decline in death sentences and executions. Death sentences were at a historic low – 114 – in 2010, 64% less than in 1996, when they peaked at 315. There were 46 executions in 2010, down from 52 in 2009. More than 40 execution dates were stayed in 2010, many due to a national shortage of a key lethal injection drug and concerns about the execution process.

Today we are affirmed in our conviction, that there is another way—there is a path that will bring us together to examine critically, speak respectfully and decide collectively that we will provide for families of homicide victims, hold people accountable for the harm they do and uphold our commitment to basic fairness under the law.

Congratulations Illinois – and to us all.

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To arrange news interviews with Diann Rust-Tierney, contact Margaret Summers, Communications Director, (202) 331-4090, x216 (o), or (202) 331-4090 (cell).

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